



JEFF SKILES

COMMENTARY / CONTRAILS

A Winter's Chill

A first snowfall throws its veil over the land

BY JEFF SKILES

THE WORLD OUTSIDE MY WINDOW has turned stark and barren. The view, so inviting seemingly moments before, has transformed into a desperate landscape of snow and ice. Winter has struck decisively once again.

Frost frames my view as the window pane succumbs to the cold outside air only separated from my shoulder by a few 1/16-inch panes of Plexiglas. It is 67 degrees below zero on the other side of the window, an inhumanly frigid temperature only eased by the thought that I am at 33,000 feet and it should be hardly unexpected. This particular flight started out warm and pleasant in a glorious Los Angeles dawn, but as we move eastward the view from seat 44A has turned surprisingly bleak.

I like to write in airplanes. Something about the fact that I am 7 miles in the sky stimulates my creative flow of ideas. Maybe it is just the complete divorce from all other daily stimuli that allows me to write so prodigiously, but it is a welcome phenomenon all the same. When tickets were a bit cheaper I had occasionally contemplated buying a round trip to the coast just to clear a hard case of writer's block, but now that all the airlines have merged I must depend on travel paid for by others. A big surprise to government regulators, but decreased competition leads to increased prices.

MEMORIES OF COLD AND ICE

Outside my window we are crossing eastern Colorado and are about to enter Nebraska. I can see some of the airports where I used to fly in what is now a time long past. Alliance, Scottsbluff, and Chadron are still fixtures on the high plains separated by a vast rolling sea of winter white. I flew the U.S. Mail in a series of Aero Commander 680s united only by their advancing age and state of seeming decrepitude. But as with many things the battered exteriors harbored a thoroughbred's soul, and they proved to be capable and reliable aerial steeds.

It was a humble aeronautical apprenticeship, but I learned many valuable lessons, chief among them how to climb the entry door and skate along the top of the fuselage and wing to check the oil and brush off the snow without falling to the icy ramp. Ladders were simply unavailable at our many stops, and we were forced to walk the big wing like mountain goats.

At Alliance I always arrived after midnight, and the airport maintenance staff, Larry, had long gone home. The runway was often snow-covered, and on landing the Commander's big tires would glide on the surface of an inch or two of fallen snow, a perfect end to a winter's eve.

I can remember one wild winter blizzard when the visibility in the driving snow wouldn't allow an approach to Alliance or even nearby Scottsbluff. As I recall I finally found shelter in Cheyenne to wait out the blow.

Winters were just as cold and long in the tooth back then, but I was 20 years old and better able to handle them. I would wear Moon boots to fly. For those of you who might remember Moon boots, they were an effective counterbalance to the Nebraska winter temperatures. Insulated coveralls were the uniform of the day as well as thick work gloves. But this was preparation for the



loading and unloading of freight and attending to the needs of the aircraft, not flight. In the air the Grand Commander's gas heater could cut through the cold air, creating a veritable sauna aloft. I always kept the heat on maximum in the hopes that my very soul would soak up the warmth and better prepare myself for the inevitable cold chill on landing.

A HARD WINTER IN WISCONSIN

Here in the back of a comfortable airliner I am heartened by my memories from the distant past, but the cold, white view outside portends my return to another hard winter in Wisconsin. The season arrived abruptly this year as the long warm Indian summer gave way to the polar vortex. Here in the northern Midwest winter is a given, and usually arrives cold and bleak. We say that we like the change of seasons here, three of them anyway, but winter is a season most could do without.

My hangar sits on the south end of Brodhead airport where three grass runways lay ready and waiting for the shifting zephyrs that abound. Mowing their length and breadth is no small job. Thankfully some around here like to mow. I can understand that; a man likes to see his work. The reward for toil is accomplishment, and mowing satisfies that greatly.

But now that the seasons have shifted, the grass no longer sprouts from the ground in response to rain and sun. The harsh winter wind blows strong, and its force drives the intricate white snow crystals into every nook and cranny. My hangar floor displays the penetrating elements of the tempest's breath as the cold, dry snow is forced under the door. Here and there tendrils of snow snake across the floor forming small drifts in imitation of their bigger cousins outside.

The runways often stay clear for a time as the wind blows the snow and ice across their length. The grassy remnants



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of summer stick up here and there through the scoured white surface that remains.

My hangar door faces north, which normally is a good direction because I can view the entirety of the small airport. But, in the winter the snow can often blow around the hangars and create a lens of ice in front of my door, often a foot or two thick. This remnant of the glacial season often keeps me trapped in my hangar well after others have thrown open their doors to invite the coming spring.

WAITING OUT THE COLD

The residents of Brodhead approach winter in varying ways. For most the flying ends for the year sometime in November to wait out the vagaries of the chill season. For them it is easiest to simply view flying as a seasonal activity, a pastime for the pleasant and warm days that will almost certainly return. Although such belief displays the shortsightedness of man, only 10,000 years ago, a mere blip in the ancient history of our planet, the land where Brodhead sits was covered with an ice sheet as much as a mile thick. For thousands of years spring never came.

Not surprisingly, the open-cockpit fliers are the first to abandon the skies. Their intimate commune with nature taking on a more unwelcome tenor as the mercury drops. The feeling of the wind in your face loses its appeal when it delivers the sharp daggers of ice and snow. A closed cabin can increase the season significantly.

When I had my cabin Waco, my passengers and I would be cozy warm with the tremendous heat that the big radial produced. Much of that warmth was directed into the cabin at all times of the year whether you were looking for heat or not. With no air vents to temper the swelter, the roll-down windows were employed to modulate the temperature. Even a half-inch difference in the opening would make a vast difference in inside comfort. Heat was never a problem for the Waco, and only in the winter could the windows be entirely closed.

The Waco's replacement, my Skywagon, has a more varied temperament. It has a very effective heater to be sure, but it also seems to suffer from its own demon drafts. As if you are seated next to an ill-sealed window in January, you can never find a place where the

warmth is uniform and your contentment is complete. A bear paw of chill air will always be on your shoulder.

A TIME TO BUILD

At Brodhead some hibernate in their hangars and use the short winter days to create and express themselves through their masterpieces of wood and fabric. They find that applying dope or bucking rivets can be even more enjoyable during the vast stretch of winter than in the hot breath of a July afternoon.

Gary comes up from Chicago and spends weekends sleeping in his hangar and working on his Bleriot. He has built a small heated shop and living quarters where his cot is mere feet away from his project. Construction is at least convenient, but his penchant for perfection doesn't make it fast.

Gary's brother, Joe, across the lane is transforming a rather mundane Taylorcraft steel tube fuselage into a wire-wheeled, Warner radial-powered 1930s monoplane. The craftsmanship that they both display clearly must run in their genetic code, and their patience for detail is extraordinary. Neither is at the 90 percent done, 90 percent to go stage, so their weekend sojourns may continue indefinitely. But, as most builders will tell you, completion is only one satisfaction to arise from a homebuilding project.

The Smith family has an ever-expanding fleet of aircraft and several hangars on the field. There is always a project or two being constructed/restored in their heated hangar. They are a bit of a local aviation dynasty, and I have never attempted to count exactly how many aircraft they own between them.

At Brodhead aircraft ownership can be a deceptive statistic anyway. People will tell you about their Waco and Fleet, their J-5 and Fairchild, and the Aeronca hanging in the rafters. You can't fathom how they can shoehorn all these specimens of flight into one hangar, but they do; they have an aileron of one, a fuselage of another, and a wingtip of a third. All with data plates only awaiting complete restoration to return them to their former glory.

ALPINE AIRPLANES

There are a few hearty souls who put their aircraft on skis for the winter. Aircraft as big

as DC-3s have sported skis at one time or another, and Alaskans will have their Cessna 180s on skis by November, but here in the Midwest it is often left for the Champ/Cub crowd.

Ski flying does require preparation. First of all you often have to remove your wheels to put the aircraft on skis. If those are hydraulic wheel skis, it can entail the connection of lines and fittings. Straight skis are simpler but don't roll across a concrete hangar floor very well—or roll across anything for that matter. With either, the transition from snow to concrete requires effort and planning.

Snow blowing in front of the hangar is essential, and wheeled dollies can be developed to roll/slide the aircraft to the snow. A bit of a burden to be sure, but once in their element skiplanes can be incredibly satisfying. More so than on grass, the cushioning effects of a landing on thick dry snow can be exquisite joy as the airplane slowly settles into the pillow-like surface.

The sport has its devoted adherents. EAA Chapter 431 is on the field; it hosts a chili/ski fly-in every February. Upward of 25 skiplanes have appeared for lunch if the snow is fresh and the sun is bright.

WINTER HIBERNATION

Except for the few hardy skiplane fliers and hibernating aircraft builders the winter scene is quiet. The few ski tracks left in the snow are quickly erased by the next storm, leaving the little airport pristine and new once again. It seems the perfect time to do annuals or projects while the drifting snow veils the shapes and contours of the land and muffles the sounds of man and nature.

Winter brings its own flavor to flying as it does to all pursuits. From seat 44A or a Champ on skis the transformation is complete. A cloak of purity is thrown over the land that will lay extant until the warm rays of spring bathe the earth once again. Until such time, winter's charms will immerse us all. *EAA*

Jeff Skiles, EAA Lifetime 336120, is an ATP and CFII-ME who has been flying as an airline and light airplane pilot for 38 years. He has owned a Cessna 140 and a Waco YOC and currently flies a Cessna 185. Jeff can be reached at JeffreyBSkiles@gmail.com.